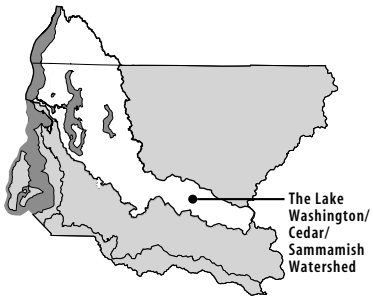
201 S. Jackson Street, 6th Floor
Seattle, WA 98104
September 25, 2003



Dr. Mary Ruckelshaus
Team Leader, Salmon Risk Evaluation Group
Northwest Fisheries Science Center
2725 Montlake Blvd. East
Seattle, WA 98112-2097

Dear Dr. Ruckelshaus:

The WRIA 8 Technical and Steering Committees are actively engaged in developing a Salmon Conservation Plan for the Lake Washington/Cedar/Sammamish Watershed. The Technical Committee is collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing data about habitat conditions that will be the scientific basis for the plan. The Steering Committee is setting the goals and policies. At the May 6, 2003, Technical Recovery Team–Puget Sound Shared Strategy workshop on Viable Salmonid Populations, it was acknowledged that the time was ripe for the TRT and NOAA Fisheries to comment on the reasonableness of several technical assumptions that underpin the WRIA 8 plan.

Issue: WRIA 8 has been highly altered since the non-native settlement of Seattle. How much of the alteration does NOAA consider permanent? What is the role of historic conditions in assessing future population viability? What assumptions about alterations are reasonable for WRIA 8 and do they fit with the larger context of recovery planning for the Puget Sound chinook ESU?

Context: The Technical Committee is compiling and interpreting data on historical and existing habitat conditions to develop an Ecosystem Diagnosis and Treatment (EDT) model of chinook and coho populations. The model requires the creation of a "template" condition that will be compared with existing conditions to help evaluate the effectiveness of salmon recovery efforts. The hydrology and salmonid community in the Lake Washington watershed were significantly altered prior to 1920 by several large-scale actions including:

1) Diversion of the Cedar River into Lake Washington and the resulting loss of the watershed's connection to the Green-Duwamish River and an extensive estuary;

Financial support provided by the signers of the interlocal agreement to cost-share watershed planning in WRIA 8: Beaux Arts Village, Bellevue, Bothell, Clyde Hill, Edmonds, Hunts Point, Issaquah, Kenmore, Kent, KIng County, Kirkland, Lake Forest Park, Maple Valley, Medina, Mercer Island, Mill Creek, Mountlake Terrace, Mukilteo, Newcastle, Redmond, Renton, Sammamish, Seattle, Shoreline, Snohomish County, Woodinville and Yarrow Point

2) Redirection of the outlet of Lake Washington from its south end at the Black River to the west side through Lake Union, the Lake Washington Ship Canal, and the Hiram M. Chittenden Locks;
3) Lowering of the level of Lake Washington by 8.8 feet and the loss of nearly 10 miles of shoreline and about 1,000 acres of wetlands around the lake; and
4) Lowering the base water level of the Sammamish River.

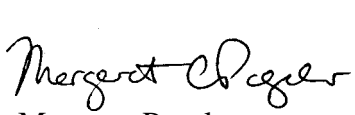
In addition, natural changes of the level of Lake Washington of more than 15 feet between winter floods and summer drought are now limited to two feet with low water occurring during the winter and high water in the summer, a seasonal cycle that is out of phase with past natural fluctuations. The controlled water-level fluctuation also eliminates backwater flushing periodically into the Sammamish River.

Given the extent of urban development that depends upon these alterations, it is highly unlikely that the original hydrology will be reconstructed under any conceivable recovery scenario. Furthermore, an act of Congress is required to make changes in the operations of the locks, so local jurisdictions do not have the authority to change the management priorities from navigation and flood control to fisheries.

To facilitate EDT modeling and set realistic goals for future conditions and habitat recovery, the Technical Committee has assumed that historical (i.e., "template") conditions comprise pre-European settlement habitat conditions along with the existing configuration of the locks and associated hydrology.

Thank you very much for your assistance. We look forward to continued opportunities to discuss WRIA 8 technical with the Technical Recovery Team and Shared Strategy. Your comments and perhaps a Memorandum of Understanding will help clarify some of our assumptions about future and historic conditions and advance implementation of salmon recovery.

Sincerely,



Margaret Pageler
Seattle City Council
WRIA 8 Steering Committee Co-Chair

Larry Phillips
King County Council
WRIA 8 Steering Committee Co-Chair

cc: WRIA 8 Steering Committee members
WRIA 8 Technical Committee members
Jane Lamensdorf-Bucher, WRIA 8 Watershed Coordinator